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RED HOT

Margaret Davis enters Utah's rocky wilderness

UTAH can be easily overlooked among the huge range of holiday destinations on offer in a country as vast as the United States. Mention Salt Lake City to any Brit, and it will conjure up images of Mormons, weak beer and the 2002 Winter Olympics.

Utah has much more to offer than that, especially for those wanting to escape the daily grind and shake off the cobwebs in a spectacular outdoor playground.

Best known for skiing and winter sports, it's a breathtaking rocky wilderness. Its landscape ranges from Alpine-esque mountains to the red rock made famous by the movie *Thelma and Louise* and John Wayne.

The Swiss Mormons who first settled in Midway's Heber Valley, less than an hour's drive from Salt Lake City airport, were drawn to the Wasatch Mountains because they were reminded of their home nation.

Their legacy lives on in slightly eccentric shape at the Swiss-themed Zermatt resort, where visitors are greeted by a bronze statue of a bear playing an accordion – a tribute to a man who would don fancy dress every year on Swiss Day.

Meticulous attention has been paid to the interior, with furnishings, carvings and wood sourced from Europe.

Pony trekking in the foothills nearby is a fun and novel way to see the countryside. Fly-fishing is also on offer, while more sedate visitors can sample a unique geological feature. The Homestead Resort, opposite Zermatt in Midway, boasts a natural crater filled with warm spring water all year round, encased by a beehive dome of rock.

Further south, the landscape changes with Grand Canyon-style scenery. Fuel yourself up for a walk at Ray's in Green River, a genuine American road house with pool, jukebox and great burgers.

Dead Horse Point, half a mile from where the climax of *Thelma and Louise* was shot, gives a jaw-dropping view over the Colorado River. Without the water, you'd think you were on Mars.

The spine-tingling sights continue in Arches National Park, with its monoliths and sheer rock faces. Utah is simply vast, and it's a unique feeling to be surrounded by yawning miles of natural landscape.

For the more adventurous there is white-water rafting on the Colorado River, led by expert guides who steer rubber vessels between the rocks, with stretches of calm, flat water punctuated by adrenalin-pumping rapids.

Moab, the small town where raft operator Sheri Griffiths is based, attracts hoards of active types in summer and has a sprinkling of shops, bars and restaurants.

It has a friendly feel, with great Mexican food at Miguel's Baja Grill.

A more relaxed river expedition awaits on the San Juan River, leaving from Bluff. The archaeological trip will see your guide explain the spectacular geology of the surrounding area, with stops to see ancient paintings and ruins on the way.

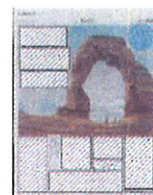
There is the unavoidable need, being out in the wilderness, to pee in bushes near the river. And even if you manage to hold it in all day, the loos in the national parks are compost toilets, so you really can't avoid being in touch with nature. The differences between the rural life here and the UK was brought home by the fact San Juan County got its first mobile phone mast in the week I visited.

Another great place to embrace the great outdoors is hiking in Capitol Reef National Park. The Sulphur Canyon route, classed as moderate, was mostly easy going but we visited when the river water was "higher than it had been for five years" according to our guide Scott.

This meant a good deal more scrambling over rock ledges and climbing down fairly steep drops than intended, but it was fantastic fun. Just make sure no-one minds getting their shoes and trousers thoroughly drenched.

Coming back to urban surroundings, Salt Lake City is a pleasant and nicely laid-out town, with chances for fine dining and a night out in a bar, as well as good shopping during the day.

So when you plan your next holiday, give Utah a chance – you'll come back



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fully refreshed and fired up with a new
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Stunning rock
formation at
Arches
National Park
(above), the
view from
Dead Horse
Point (below
left) and Salt
Lake City
(below right)

